

INTERVIEW WITH RAY ST. ORES
BY DOROTHE NORTON, NOVEMBER 6, 2002
HUDSON, WISCONSIN

MS. NORTON: We're going to start out with some personal information. What are your birthplace and date?

MR. ST. ORES: I was born on July 6, 1924 in Hudson, Wisconsin.

MS. NORTON: What were your parents' names?

MR. ST. ORES: My father was Rufus and my mother was Olga.

MS. NORTON: Did you spend all of your young life here in Hudson?

MR. ST. ORES: Everything was here until I went into the Army.

MS. NORTON: What hobbies, books or event influenced you as you were growing up?

MR. ST. ORES: I think my biggest influence was the local Game Warden. I wanted to be a Game Warden and he said, "No, you don't want to be a Game Warden. You're going to go and be a biologist." He knew a fellow named Erv Buss, who was a great Biologist. He had done a lot of work on the African Elephant, and he knew Aldo Leopold down at Madison. Erv Buss took me down to Aldo Leopold and that's how I got interested in wildlife biology.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever have any jobs when you were a kid?

MR. ST. ORES: Oh yes! I pumped gas for twenty-five cents a week. I worked in a bakery. I sliced bread and delivered it in a truck. I got fifteen dollars a week for that. Canning factory canning corn and peas and things like that. You were always looking for something to do because money was tough to get in those days.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever go hunting or fishing?

MR. ST. ORES: Yes, I did all of the time when I was a kid. There was a kid who was the son of the local police officer. He was a great hunter. His name was Joe Levinsky. Joe took a liking to me and took me hunting and fishing all of the time. That's how I got started. He ended up in prison. During the war they let him out of prison and he ended up in South Africa. In those days, if you were in the "pen", and you agreed to go in the Army, they'd let you out. He got killed in Africa. His dad was the Police Chief here in Hudson.

MS. NORTON: What high school did you go to? What year did you graduate?

MR. ST. ORES: Hudson High School. I graduated in 1942.

MS. NORTON: And then, what University did you attend?

MR. ST. ORES: The University of Wisconsin. I was in World War II in the Army first. I spent time over in Europe. Then, when I got out I went down to the University.

MS. NORTON: How many years did you serve in the Army?

MR. ST. ORES: About three years, during the war.

MS. NORTON: What duty stations were you at?

MR. ST. ORES: I was all over Europe; England, France, Belgium, Germany.

MS. NORTON: Did you get any decorations while you were in the service?

MR. ST. ORES: No, just the usual stuff like good conduct medals and theater ribbons. The one that I couldn't get was called, "the American theater ribbon". You had to be in the service for six months, in the United States to get that. I wasn't in the States long enough! They'd train you and ship you off in a hurry.

MS. NORTON: Did your military service relate in any way to your employment with FWS?

MR. ST. ORES: Nope, not a bit.

MS. NORTON: What degree did you get from the University of Wisconsin?

MR. ST. ORES: I got a B.S. degree in wildlife biology. What was it exactly? I can't even remember! It used to be up on the wall up there. It was a combination degree that they set up shortly after the war. I don't see it here. Oh here it is. It only says, 'biology', but I think it was the biological aspects of conservation. That's what it was.

MS. NORTON: Did you go on, after the bachelors?

MR. ST. ORES: I went on for another year because I couldn't get a job right away and there were some courses I wanted to take. I did not get a Masters.

MS. NORTON: What aspect of your formal education equipped you for the future?

MR. ST. ORES: It was all of my schooling at the University of Wisconsin.

MS. NORTON: Who do you think influenced your education and your career track?

MR. ST. ORES: I wanted to work for the FWS, but I didn't have any influences that way. It was just what I wanted to do.

MS. NORTON: Can you tell me when, where and how you met your wife?

MR. ST. ORES: I met her when she was in the eighth grade. I really started going with her when she was a freshman in high school. She was over in the Catholic School. Then when they got to high school, they came over to the public school. We've been going together ever since! We got married in Black River Falls, Wisconsin on December 26, 1946.

MS. NORTON: Did you have any children?

MR. ST. ORES: We had one son.

MS. NORTON: What is he doing now?

MR. ST. ORES: He is a soil scientist with US Soil Conservation Service, right over in the city. He's really a groundwater specialist. He lives over in the city during the week. He bought an old farm up north and goes up there on weekends. I spend time up there a lot with him. That's where we hunt and fish. It's nice there.

MS. NORTON: You had just the one child?

MR. ST. ORES: Just the one, and no grandchildren. None that we can talk about anyway!

MS. NORTON: Why did you want to work for the FWS?

MR. ST. ORES: It was just always there. I don't know why, I just always did.

MS. NORTON: What was your first professional position?

MR. ST. ORES: It was as Refuge Manager on the Upper Mississippi Refuge in the Savannah, Illinois district, as a GS-5. I got \$2900.00 a year!

MS. NORTON: Goodness! What did you do there?

MR. ST. ORES: I managed that part of the river that was part of the refuge. It was between two dams down there, locks and dams. There was a lot of timber harvesting going on so I had to mark all of the timber. We had trapping going on so we had to sell trapping licenses. We had to enforce waterfowl laws during the season. That's pretty much what it was.

MS. NORTON: Where did you go from there?

MR. ST. ORES: Then I went to Lansing, Iowa for five years. I did the same thing there at Pool Nine on the Upper Mississippi River. From there I went to Waubay, South Dakota National Wildlife Refuge. I was there for about a year. We had farmland and grazing land out there to take care of. It was still working with wildlife. And there were more people; well, there were more visitors to the refuge. On the river, we had a lot but they came in by boat. Out there, they came in to an individual place so you could keep track of them. We had a nice deer herd out there and lots of big geese. They were the giant Canadas what were supposedly extinct at the time. After Waubay I went in to the Regional Office in Minneapolis. I was there until I retired in the 1970s.

MS. NORTON: What grade and title were you when you retired?

MR. ST. ORES: I retired as the Assistant Regional Director for Environment; that was a GS-14 I guess, I can't remember.

MS. NORTON: Was that in 1972?

MR. ST. ORES: It was in 1979.

MS. NORTON: What month?

MR. ST. ORES: September.

MS. NORTON: When you came to work for the FWS, what were the pay and benefits like?

MR. ST. ORES: Well, at \$2900.00 a year, I didn't think a lot about it. But I knew they had a retirement system. Fortunately, I was able to contribute to that. At \$2900.00 there wasn't an awful lot of money to put anyplace. The pay was okay. My dad was working for about \$1200.00 a year after a lifetime of being a mechanic. We lived on it, let's say that.

MS. NORTON: When you changed duty stations, did you have promotion opportunities?

MR. ST. ORES: I got a seven when I went to...they were pretty well set. Each refuge had certain grades. At Lansing I was a seven, and at Waubay I was a nine. Of course after the wetland program got going a lot of those wetland areas came under the supervision of the Refuge Manager at Waubay. They pushed that up to an eleven then. It might even be higher than that now, but I don't know.

MS. NORTON: Did you socialize with the people that you worked with?

MR. ST. ORES: On Waubay there was nobody to socialize with! In Lansing, Iowa I was on the fire department for five years. We used to put on plays to raise money for the fire department. It was a volunteer affair. Joan belonged to a bridge group down there. Through the local game warden I met the President of the Lansing Company, which made buttons. I used to go out on the big boat with him and spend an overnight. He had a great big houseboat. During the hunting season I'd kind of make that my headquarters, I could work right off of that boat. It was nice.

MS. NORTON: What did you do for recreation in the field?

MR. ST. ORES: Fished and hunted.

MS. NORTON: Did your career affect your family in any way? If so, how?

MR. ST. ORES: Joan did not like being on the wildlife refuge out in the country. I think my boy enjoyed it. And I think my career made him go into the type of work that he is in. I don't know, other than that whether it was any big affect or not. Joan didn't mind anyplace else, but that refuge way out in South Dakota in the country. We didn't see anybody but the clerk.

MS. NORTON: I probably wouldn't have liked something like that either.

MR. ST. ORES: I thought it was great. You could look out of the kitchen window and there would be deer and fox right out in the yard. There were always geese around.

MS. NORTON: What kind of training did you receive for all of your jobs?

MR. ST. ORES: Other than the university, there were just some civil service courses that you went through that the FWS put on in later years like Management and this and that. I remember about one month before I was going to retire they wanted to send me to California to go to school. What an asinine thing to do! Why spend money on that for two weeks when I am going to retire? I didn't go.

MS. NORTON: What hours did you work?

MR. ST. ORES: On the refuge it was non-ending. You were on call all of the time, especially on the river, and up in South Dakota too. You'd get a call, or you'd hear something going on and you'd go. I had a call one time, while I was in Lansing, Iowa. It was a guy from Decorah, Iowa. His grandson was missing. This man had a cabin up on the river and he was really concerned. He said, "I hate to ask you this, but will you go up and see if he's there?" He was a banker. This was at two o'clock in the morning. I put the boat in of course. Sure enough, the kid was up there. I called him back up and told him that he didn't have to worry any more. That was a real interesting thing.

MS. NORTON: What were your day-to-day duties on the refuges?

MR. ST. ORES: There was a non-ending job and that was brushing out the refuge ownership lines. They would grow up to timber and you'd have to keep those clean. During trapping season in the fall, everyone would have to come in and get the federal trapping licenses and permits that they put on each trap. I'd sell those. I did surveys of how many waterfowl in the air at any given time, or the number of muskrats we had, the number of beaver houses and things like that. During the hunting season it was just mostly law enforcement work all of the time. I had a boss up in Winona, Ray Steele who loved to have his people out on law enforcement and have them make cases. I made like twenty-two cases on the first day I was up there at Lansing, Iowa. I had the boat full of shotguns and they all got wet cause the boat leaked. It was a government furnished boat, of course, a Penyan, as I recall. I spent all nightlong cleaning and drying those shotguns! From then on, I didn't confiscate any guns. I just had a piece of paper all signed that said "I have confiscated your gun and returned it to you" will you please sign here?"

MS. NORTON: What tools and instruments did you use?

MR. ST. ORES: Axes, saws, machetes, post hole diggers; out in South Dakota we used mowing machines for the trails, and trackers with drags on them for the roads so you could smooth them out. I always carried binoculars, of course. But other than that there wasn't anything really special.

MS. NORTON: Did you ever witness any new Service inventions or innovations?

MR. ST. ORES: I can remember the time when in law enforcement work; if you were hunting waterfowl with a motorboat, you had to take the motor off from the back of the boat even though the boat was way up on shore before you could hunt. I thought that was a lousy thing. I wrote up a lot of cases, but I never took them in. I wrote them up and let them know that this was a violation of the law. I never told them I wasn't going to take them. But I just thought that was a terrible piece of legislation or law. They took it off of the books some time after that, as I recall. That's one thing that always really gripped me.

MS. NORTON: Did you work with animals?

MR. ST. ORES: No, other than the wild animals. We put up wood duck houses and things like that. There was nothing that you had to do other than count them. As far as handling them, I trapped and banded geese at Waubay. About four days before Christmas one year, I trapped some and they recovered them on Christmas day down in Texas. So right after I trapped and banded them, they took off and went all of the way to Texas. That was kind of interesting.

MS. NORTON: How did you feel toward the animals?

MR. ST. ORES: Oh, I loved the animals! But I liked to shoot ducks and geese.

MS. NORTON: When you were on those refuges, what support did you received locally, regionally or federally?

MR. ST. ORES: That's a good question. I don't think any local support was obvious to me. The regional office was always willing to help if you had any problems, but I never really had any significant problems. Once in a while we'd see some of the big wheels out of Minneapolis or Washington, D.C. I remember Bob Burwell stopped in. That was just before he got to be Regional Director. Dan Jansen was ahead of him. I hadn't been there very long, but we went out. The geese had just come in that day. I told him, "Look it, the geese knew you were coming and here they are!" It was nice to have the people come around. At least they knew you were alive and doing things, and knew you were there.

MS. NORTON: How do you thing the Service was perceived by people outside of the agency?

MR. ST. ORES: I don't know as I can answer that. I think they held it in a certain degree of awe because it was the ultimate in waterfowl management. Everybody else looked up to it, including the state people. I never heard anything bad about it, when I was working.

MS. NORTON: Did the communities where the refuges were have good relations as far as publicity and things like that?

MR. ST. ORES: It was always in the local papers. My clerk was from a little town not too far from there. Everyone knew him. He'd raised his family there and worked for the refuge for his whole career. They certainly were aware of the place. We used to shop in Webster, South Dakota. You could talk to the doctor and store people about the refuge and what was going on. Other than that, I can't add anything.

MS. NORTON: At least they were aware of you.

MR. ST. ORES: Oh yeah. And now, I am sure they are because of that small wetland program out there. There's wetlands all over that belong to the federal government. All of the different refuges manage the ones that are in their areas.

MS. NORTON: What projects were you involved in?

MR. ST. ORES: In my early career, or my career in general?

MS. NORTON: Your career in general.

MS. ST. ORES: When I moved in to the Regional Office, we were involved in preserving wetlands from agricultural drainage in the tri-state area of the two Dakotas and western Minnesota. Our field staff was collecting data on the amount of drainage that was going on and what was being lost. It turned out that when I was there, the drainage was paid for by the federal government, you know, the Drainage Assistance. The amount of water that had been drained up to the time I was there was equal to the surface area of Lake Erie. That's a lot of water! Of course, that all had to run off someplace. Where do you drain it? To the roadside ditches. And where do they go? They go into a little rivulet and that goes on to something bigger and pretty soon you've got them all ending up in the river. If you look at the Red River Valley which suffered so much, that area has been so drained out, there is nothing left to hold water anyplace. Besides that, the Red River runs north. In the spring it's thawing here and frozen up in Canada. But a lot of that flooding out there is simply because of the drainage that occurred in that whole river valley area so they could plant their sugar beets. When you take out a volume of water equal to the surface area of Lake Michigan, and it's got to go someplace, rather than soak into the ground. It's pretty easy to see that this is going to cause some problems eventually, and it did. Now of course, they are buying and leasing the wetlands back again. Agriculture itself is in a money paying position to pay the farmers to maintain their wetlands and also to pay them to leave grasslands so that the waterfowl have a place to nest. It's kind of a real switch from doing all of the damage, to paying to preserve it now. It was at a time of course when there was plenty of grain and corn out there, but they were still draining and planting more. Then, the surplus was too much. They had to store it great big areas that the government provided too. It was a bad situation, as I saw it. That's what I was working on when I came back in to Minneapolis. We collected enough data and eventually wrote a report. We sent it in to Washington. We suggested that they buy or lease one million, seven hundred and fifty thousand acres of wetlands for waterfowl. Eventually, that's what happened. All of those small wetlands out there are a result of that program that Burt Rounds and I were involved with. Ken Black was the Regional Director for a time down in Minneapolis. That program was well worth the money. I think it was one of the best programs in the government because of what it has done for waterfowl.

MS. NORTON: What were the major issues that you had to deal with?

MS. ST. ORES: Up until then, it was simply drainage sponsored and pay for by the Soil Conservation Service, and the APCS; Agriculture Program Service. They paid for it. SCS did the surveying work and things like that. With the passing of the NEPA, the National Environment Policy Act, I got involved with that. The people who were building projects had to prepare an environmental impact statement saying what effect it was going to have on the fish and wildlife. Those reports or impact statements would come to my office. We had some people to send out to the field and have them tell us about this issue. It would be either no impact, or the impact would be so severe that we wouldn't even want to have the project. If it was so tough on fish and wildlife, we'd recommend that they shouldn't have the project. This had to do with the iron ore factories or smelting. It had to do with navigation on the Great Lakes River, and the dams and anything that required a federal permit. It was a long affair. It's still an active program. After I left the wetland side of it, I was strictly in the environmental end of it; reviewing impact statements and things like that.

MS. NORTON: Has your perspective or opinion on these issues changed with time?

MR. ST. ORES: It has. I had the feeling that the SCS is now doing more to preserve waterfowl habitat than the FWS is. That's just an opinion, but that's what you asked me!

MS. NORTON: Was there a major impediment to your job or career?

MR. ST. ORES: I don't think so.

MS. NORTON: Who were your supervisors, if you can remember?

MR. ST. ORES: Let's see... Joan, do you remember who that guy was who came down and interviewed you when we were in college to see if I was all right to go to work for FWS?

MRS. ST. ORES: No.

MR. ST. ORES: Forest Carpenter was the Assistant Regional Supervisor for Refuges.

MRS. ST. ORES: It wasn't him.

MR. ST. ORES: It was Fran Gillette. He was the Regional Supervisor for Refuges at the time.

MRS. ST. ORES: We were so hungry for a job at the time that if he had told us we had to jump off of the highest bridge, I would have said 'okay'!

MR. ST. ORES: After Fran Gillette, I came in to Minneapolis, there was a fellow who was the head of River Basin Studies and became the Director for the Minnesota Conservation Department for a few years. Tom Schrader was his name. When he left Warren Knord came in from out east and took over his position as head of River Basin Studies. I was still there then. Then I went over to Animal Damage Control. I was working on wetland preservation. They transferred that out of River Basins into Animal Damage Control, I don't know why. That's not part of FWS anymore. It's in the Department of Agriculture now. I then went back to River Basin Studies and then just before I retired I was the Assistant Regional Director for Environment.

MS. NORTON: Who was the RD then?

MR. ST. ORES: When I retired it was....

MS. NORTON: Was it Harvey Nelson?

MR. ST. ORES: No. Harvey came just about the time I retired. It was Harvey's assistant. Do you remember? He wore glasses. He was the Acting Regional Director. And we had one from down south. He retired from high blood pressure. Do you remember him?

MS. NORTON: I remember a Travis Roberts, but I don't know anything about him.

MR. ST. ORES: No, Trav was there for a while. This guy was....

MS. NORTON: There was Art Hewlett.

MR. ST. ORES: He was the acting one at about the time I retired.

MS. NORTON: There was Jack Hemphill.

MR. SR. ORES: That's the one I was trying to think of! I enjoyed Jack. And I enjoyed Art Hewlett, and Bob Burwell of course.

MS. NORTON: He was the RD when I started.

MR. ST. ORES: He became the RD while I was at Waubay Refuge because Dan Jansen went to Washington to be the Director of FWS.

MS. NORTON: Did any of those individuals help to shape your career?

MR. ST. ORES: Well, I think they were always helpful. They almost let me do what I wanted, which I assumed to mean that I was doing what they wanted. Some rumors got back to Hemphill one time about something I had said about one of the new employees he had hired. He came down right away to talk to me about it. I told him it was just an opinion. I didn't know why they guy would come up here, leaving a university, to take a job worth a lot less money. We always got along fine. I got along fine with all of the RDs.

MS. NORTON: Who were some of the people that you knew, who didn't work for the FWS? Do you feel that they would have been able to work for FWS?

MR. ST. ORES: I hired some state people. I hired Jim Seeve from Iowa and fellow named Anderson from South Dakota. They were all waterfowl people. They were the best they had at the time as far as I was concerned. I always got along good with the state. There was George Kaufman down in Iowa. He was a Game Warden there. He was just a great guy and would back me up for anything I wanted to do. I just never had any problems at all with those people.

MS. NORTON: Do you recall what Presidents were in office when you were working?

MR. ST. ORES: No, I can't.

MS. NORTON: What about Secretaries of the Interior or Directors of FWS?

MR. ST. ORES: Boy, that's awful, asking me those things! I am trying to think of them. There was Babbitt. I am trying to think of the one who had a crew cut of dark hair. I think he was from Colorado. I thought he was pretty good.

MS. NORTON: Do you think that changes in the administrations affected the work that we did?

MR. ST. ORES: I always had some problems, and maybe more in the later years, when they would take people to be the Director of FWS from outside of the FWS. The poor guy in the Service gives his whole career and doesn't have a chance to be the Director. I think it's still that way. It's the same with the Secretary of Interior. They don't seem to be getting the people that I'd like to see in there. Every time there is a change, why, they reorganize and pretty soon it's like moving from one horse on the merry-go-round to another. After enough reorganizations, you're back on the same dam horse!

MS. NORTON: In your opinion, who were the individuals who shaped the Service?

MR. ST. ORES: I think it was the early Directors, up to Dan Jansen. Those were the big ones. Dan Jansen and those ahead of him. Because that's when the groundwork was laid.

There was this guy from Iowa who used to be a newspaperman, he became the Director of FWS; Ding Darling. I've got some of his cartoons around the house.

MS. NORTON: He and Flick Davis were really good friends.

MR. ST. ORES: Flick was another one that I enjoyed talking to and being with. He was a good, solid, honest guy I thought.

MS. NORTON: There was James Watt.

MR. ST. ORES: Oh yeah, he was Secretary of the Interior. We were down in Florida one time and I wasn't a friend of James Watt. I had on my bumper plate, "Watts Wrong!" Every once in a while we'd be driving along and someone would honk their horn and clap. And every once in a while we'd get the finger too!

MS. NORTON: What do you consider to be the high point in your career?

MR. ST. ORES: I think the high point was having a big hand in establishing the Small Wetland Acquisition Program. There's nothing more important, to me, at the time and it still is. It's the basis for waterfowl production and it's for continuing hunting. It's never going to be like when we were kids, you could take twenty-five birds! But at least there's some birds to be taken now. We have some of those small wetlands over here around Wisconsin. I have hunted a couple of them for some years and had a great time on them. I knew they were there because of the work that the crew that I worked with did. To me, that was the high point of my career; getting that done.

MS. NORTON: Was there a low point in your career?

MR. ST. ORES: No, I don't think I had any low points.